



# Social Psychology in Organizations

## Advances in Theory and Research

J. KEITH MURNIGHAN, EDITOR

*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*



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## Contents

Preface	x1
CHAPTER ONE	
Theory and Research in Social Psychology and Organizations	1
J. KEITH MURNIGHAN	
CHAPTER TWO	
Sensemaking in Organizations: Small Structures with Large Consequences	10
KARL E. WEICK	
CHAPTER THREE	
Out of the Lab and Into the Field: Decision Making in Organizations	38
JOHN S. CARROLL	
CHAPTER FOUR	
Affect and Organizational Behavior: When and Why Feeling Good (or Bad) Matters	63
ROBERT A. BARON	

# Sensemaking in Organizations: Small Structures with Large Consequences

KARL E. WEICK

*University of Michigan*

A key problem in organizational inquiry is to explain how microstabilities are produced in the midst of continuing change. It is proposed that the body of work on behavioral commitment can be reformulated as a prototype of sensemaking in organizations to solve this problem. The central concept is "committed interpretation," the use of binding social action to generate richer qualitative information that stabilizes a confusing flow of events. The concept of committed interpretation suggests that people become bound to interacts rather than acts, that the form of interacts is itself committing, and that justifications of commitment tend to invoke social rather than solitary entities. These three seeds of social order enlarge and diffuse among people through enactment, imitation, proselytizing, and reification, thereby imposing order on confusion. The concept of committed interpretation provides a synthesis of several lines of micro investigation, but more importantly specifies a possible mechanism by which structuration actually occurs.

When scholars evaluate their own work, they often apply unconsciously what I will call the "Schutz Test of Comprehension." In the book *Profound Simplicity*, William Schutz made the following observation about his own writing: "When I look over the books I have written, I know exactly which parts I understood and which parts I did not understand when I wrote them. The poorly understood parts sound scientific. When I barely understood something, I kept it in scientific jargon. When I really comprehend it, I was able to explain it to anyone in language they understood. . . . Understanding evolves through three phases: simplistic, complex, and profoundly simple" (Schutz, 1979, pp. 68–69).

When I applied that same test to the second edition of my book, *The Social Psychology of Organizing* (Weick, 1979), I discovered something that Richard Hackman anticipated on March 27, 1976. Richard and I were exchanging pencilled sketches at a meeting of social psychologists to help pass the time more quickly. One of Hackman's drawings shows two gravestones, one for each of

us. On his stone is the epitaph, "He saved the world," and on mine is written, "He understood the world," and at the bottom of the diagram is written, "And they both were kidding themselves."

Whether we are kidding ourselves or not, Hackman is still trying to save the world and I am still trying to understand it. What happens in my case is that my own desire to understand the world has led me to attribute the same desire to the world itself. Thus, I view organizations as collections of people trying to make sense of what is happening around them.

The clearest parts of the organizing book (Weick, 1979) were about the process of understanding and included such ideas as (1) understanding involves the tradeoffs among generality, accuracy, and simplicity (pp. 35–42); (2) cause loops create predictability (pp. 74–77); (3) experience is stored in cause maps (pp. 138–143); (4) order is enacted into the world in ways that resemble self-fulfilling prophecies (pp. 159–164); (5) it takes a complex sensor to understand a complex world (pp. 188–193); and (6) sensemaking is a retrospective process (pp. 194–201).

Behind these ideas were remnants of a mindset that dates back to my dissertation. That mindset originated as an interest in cognitive dynamics (Markus & Zajonc, 1985, pp. 139–141), specifically the effects of cognitive dissonance on performance. Cognitive conflict was the independent variable that was hypothesized to have an effect on performance, because performance would be the means by which the conflict could be resolved.

In the study designed to test this idea (Weick, 1964), people agreed to do a difficult concept attainment task after they learned that they would get less reward for their participation than they expected (see Zanna, 1973 for a tighter version of this study). Those who were deprived most severely rated the subsequent task more interesting and were three times more productive at performing it than were people who felt less deprived. At the time, I felt that the severely deprived people had to resolve a disturbing set of cognitions: I came here to get the rewards they promised me, but I didn't get those rewards, yet I'm still participating. How come? Their answer was, because this is such an interesting task. That answer is actually a complex mixture of prospective and retrospective sensemaking. By working hard and solving more problems, they created a situation that confirmed the sensibleness of agreeing to participate in the first place. Ontology and epistemology were woven together out of cognitive necessity.

What continues to interest me about that study is that not only does it capture the effect of cognition on action, it also captures the effect of action on cognition. It does the latter more by accident than by design. Even though I designed the study to create cognitive dissonance, I also accidentally created the conditions later found to induce strong behavioral commitment. It will be recalled that three conditions are necessary for behavioral commitment: choice, an irreversible action, and public awareness of the action (Salancik, 1977). The dissertation experiment was designed so that people experienced several sources of dissonance. The study was built this way on the assumption that dissonant cognitions are additive and that the more dissonance, the stronger the pressure to

do something about it. So negative features were added until the breaking point was reached, when a few people would refuse to participate.

At the time, I was more interested in the number of dissonant elements and did not pay much attention to their content. But now it is clear that the dilemma I created involved *choice* (the person could stay or leave, and four people chose to leave), *irreversibility* (once people agreed to stay, they could not back out halfway through the task), and *public awareness* of the decision (I, the experimenter, knew what the person chose to do, how that person performed, and could tell other people.) So the person made a clear commitment to work on a task, a commitment whose full content was not grasped at the beginning. The person gained a deeper understanding of what that original decision involved when he started to work on that task. Closer attention to the task accompanied by increased effort revealed unsuspected attractions that were given additional substance and credibility by hard work. Hard work literally built the convincing reasons that justified the choice to participate.

Notice the way in which the causal arrow is reversed when this study is reinterpreted as an instance of behavioral commitment. Now, cognition in the form of justification becomes the dependent variable and action is the independent variable from which the person draws inferences about what is happening. Having performed the concept attainment task successfully, the person infers that he must have liked the task, which then becomes the reason the person agreed to participate in the first place—even though he had no idea what the task would be when making the choice. Action affects cognition, which is the opposite direction of causality from that implied by dissonant cognitions affecting action.

The experiment mixes together the hot cognition of conflict resolution with the cold cognition of inference. That interpretation is obviously clearer in hindsight than it was at the time of execution. And both themes are largely buried by a rather heavy-handed set of experimental operations. Nevertheless, a prototype of sensemaking is implied in that study. The purpose of this chapter is to elaborate that prototype in context of organizations and show how it links with other work on sensemaking.

Before we explore the key ideas in depth, let's preview the argument. If we generalize the experiment, it suggests that behavioral commitment is a stimulus to build cosmologies and coherent world views out of whatever resources are at hand. Whenever people act, their actions may become binding if those actions occur in a context of high choice, high irreversibility, and high visibility. If action occurs under these conditions, then subsequent events may be enacted in the service of justification. Thus, justification can become an important source of social structure, culture, and norms. For example, Alan Meyer's (1982) important work on how hospitals adapted to the environmental jolt of a doctor's strike can be read as a series of commitments that were justified by the consolidation and articulation of a consistent culture, strategy, and structure. Each hospital became a more distinct, coherent entity after administrations chose publicly to cope with the strike by weathering the storm, experimenting with contingency plans, or monitoring controls more closely.

Organizations begin to materialize when rationales for commitment become articulated. Since the decisions that stimulate justification originate in small-scale personal acts, organizational rationales often originate in the service of self-justification. Only later does justification become redefined as collective intention. Justifications can easily be transformed into organizational goals because these goals themselves are so general. But collective goals can best be understood as embellishments of earlier direct efforts to validate the soundness of individual commitments on a smaller scale.

From the perspective of commitment, organizations are interesting for a specific reason. To see this, consider Daft's (1986, p. 9) definition of an organization as a social entity that is a goal-directed, deliberately structured activity system with an identifiable boundary. Like most scholars, Daft views an organization as a deliberately structured tool. What is left unspecified is the precise nature of that tool. And that is where commitment becomes important. Organizations are viewed as unique social forms that embody choice, visibility, and irrevocability. Goal direction itself takes on a different meaning: "Goals are discovered through a social process involving argumentation and debate in a setting where justification and legitimacy play important roles" (Anderson, 1983, p. 214).

Thus, organizational action is as much goal interpreted as it is goal directed, and the language of goals is indistinguishable from the language of justification.

Since binding choices can affect the tasks we are attracted to, the reasons that move us, the values we seek to realize, the plans we admire, and the people with whom we align ourselves, commitment helps us to understand organizational life. Organizations are filled with potential committing conditions. In most organizations, people do things that others see (e.g., Tetlock, 1985); people make choices and decisions (e.g., empowerment); choices commit resources to programs and structures that are not reversible; participation is used to raise ownership ("ownership" is simply a synonym for commitment); sunk costs are treated as a variable to be justified rather than a given to be dismissed; and the motivational backdrop for all employment is portrayed as a decision to participate, a decision to produce, and a psychological contract.

Despite the potential sweep of commitment and sensemaking, both concepts refer to events that have relatively small beginnings. Both commitment and sensemaking are promising concepts that can broaden the micro side of macro topics (O'Reilly, 1991, p. 449) and offset the current dominance of macro perspectives in organizational analysis.

To illustrate this promise, the remainder of this chapter addresses the following issues. First, we look more closely at the nature of sensemaking and at equivocality as the basic problem that organizations confront. After an overview of the nature of sensemaking we move, in the second section, to an elaboration of the idea of sensemaking as committed interpretation. After reviewing key ideas about interpretation and commitment, we propose a model by which these two processes interact. In the third section we take a closer look at the commitment process itself and show how interaction is inherently committing. We then look at justification in the fourth section and suggest that it creates social struc-

ture in a manner reminiscent of the documentary method of interpretation. In the fifth section, we examine the ways in which justifications are validated, a step that is crucial for organizational analysis even though it is usually ignored. We conclude with a brief discussion of implications.

#### THE NATURE OF SENSEMAKING

The central problem of sensemaking is best conveyed by an analogy between sensemaking and the game of Mastermind (Fay, 1990). The object of Mastermind is for a codebreaker to duplicate the exact pattern of colored pegs inserted into holes that has been created by a codemaker but is concealed from the codebreaker by a shield. The codebreaker ventures hypotheses as to what the pattern might be and, on the basis of information supplied by the codemaker, refines the hypothesis until the codebreaker's hypothesis exactly matches the codemaker's original pattern.

Mastermind is precisely what sensemaking is not. People cannot be sure there is a mastercode to be discovered, nor can they be sure what the nature of the code might be, nor even if there is some order in the first place. Even if people do discover the code, they can never be sure they have done so since there is nothing equivalent to the removal of the shield at the end of the game, which reveals the concealed code. Although the basic materials in the Mastermind game are pegs, colors, and holes, the person engaged in sensemaking does not know *a priori* what the exact building blocks are. "What the world is made of is itself a question which must be answered in terms of the available conceptual resources of science at a particular time" (Fay, 1990, p. 36).

People who try to make sense under these conditions have to differentiate and determine the nature of the materials they are working with, have to look for a unifying order without any assurance that there is a preexisting order in these materials, have to decide how to represent this order, and have to play indefinitely, never knowing whether they have discovered a unifying order.

The task of sensemaking resembles more closely the activity of cartography. There is some terrain that mapmakers want to represent, and they use various modes of projection to make this representation. What they map, however, depends on where they look, how they look, what they want to represent, and their tools for representation (Monmonier, 1991). The crucial point in cartography is that "there is no 'One Best Map' of a particular terrain. For any terrain there will be an indefinite number of useful maps, a function of the indefinite levels and kinds of description of the terrain itself, as well as the indefinite number of modes of representation and uses to which they can be put" (Fay, 1990, p. 37). The terrain is not itself already mapped such that the job of the sensemaker is to discover this preexisting map. "For mapmakers the idea of a pre-ordered world has no place or meaning" (Fay, 1990, p. 37).

It is the job of the sensemaker to convert a world of experience into an intelligible world. That person's job is not to look for the one true picture that cor-

responds to a pre-existing, preformed reality. The picture of sensemaking that emerges is not one of the tidy world of Mastermind. Instead, the picture that is suggested is "that there is nobody here but us scratching around trying to make our experience and our world as comprehensible to ourselves in the best way we can, that the various kinds of order we come up with are a product of our imagination and need, not something dictated to us by Reality Itself. There isn't any One True Map of the earth, of human existence, of the universe, or of Ultimate Reality, a Map supposedly embedded inside these things; there are only maps we construct to make sense of the welter of our experience, and only us to judge whether these maps are worthwhile for us or not" (Fay, 1990, p. 38).

The important points implied by the idea of sensemaking as cartography are the indefinite number of plausible maps that can be constructed, the role of imagination and need in the determination of the projections actually used, and the fact that the activity of sensemaking is largely social ("there is nobody here but *us* scratching around"). The problem of sensemaking is compounded because the terrain keeps changing and the task is to carve out some momentary stability in this continuous flow (Becker, 1986, p. 29). We expand on these points in the next section.

#### Equivocality in organizational life

Organizations resemble puzzling terrain because they lend themselves to multiple, conflicting interpretations, all of which are plausible (Daft & MacIntosh, 1981). In this equivocal situation of confusion, people are not sure what questions to ask, nor do they expect clear answers even if they do know the right questions (Daft & Lengel, 1986, p. 557). To reduce equivocality, people do not need larger quantities of information. Instead, they need richer qualitative information. "Information richness is defined as the ability of information to change understanding within a time interval. Communication transactions that can overcome different frames of reference or clarify ambiguous issues to change understanding in a timely manner are considered rich. Communications that require a long time to enable understanding or that cannot overcome different perspectives are lower in richness. In a sense, richness pertains to the learning capacity of a communication" (Daft & Lengel, 1986, p. 560). Information richness tends to covary with the extent of face-to-face personal interaction, which is why map making tends to be social.

The dominant form that equivocality takes in organizations is suggested by Gergen's (1982, pp. 62–65) three premises for constructivism, all of which focus on the multiple meanings of action.

1. The identification of any given action is subject to infinite revision.  
There is no such thing as an ultimate definition, partly because events occur in a continually emerging context that changes the meaning of earlier events, and partly because events occur in an open-ended retrospective context in which all kinds of prior personal and societal history can be invoked to explain what is hap-

- pening right now. There are no iron-clad rules or logics that guarantee that we will avoid the temptations to infinitely revise.
2. The anchor point for any given identification relies on a network of interdependent and continuously modifiable interpretations.
- What any action means is seldom self-evident; there is no such thing as a fixed unequivocal observable that allows for "proper identification." Since identification is determined by context, and since context is infinitely expandable into the future and the past, it is not clear which contextual indicators can be trusted among sensemakers. This issue is one that largely has to be negotiated. And whatever agreement people hammer out usually unravels as new events occur and old meanings crumble.
3. Any given action is subject to multiple identifications, the relative superiority of which is problematic.

As the number of observers increases, so too does the range of contextual events in which an action can be embedded. And, in the absence of unequivocal observables, there are no grounds other than some kind of consensus or some exercise of power (Smircich & Morgan, 1982) to stabilize what people confront and what it means. To call something "a problem" is no more privileged and no easier to sustain than is the proposal that something is "an opportunity." To make things even more complicated, either proposal can set in motion responses that confirm the label.

### Sensemaking in organizational life

If we begin to synthesize these separate images of commitment, retrospect, mastermind, map making, equivocality, rich communication media, and social construction into a coherent perspective on sensemaking, that synthesis would sound a lot like one developed by Morgan, Frost, and Pondy (1983). Sensemaking in the broadest sense is a metaphor that "focuses attention upon the idea that the reality of everyday life must be seen as an ongoing 'accomplishment,' which takes particular shape and form as individuals attempt to create order and make retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves. . . . [I]ndividuals are seen as engaged in ongoing processes through which they attempt to make their situations rationally accountable to themselves and others. . . . The sensemaking metaphor encourages an analytical focus upon the processes through which individuals create and use symbols; it focuses attention upon the study of the symbolic processes through which reality is created and sustained. Individuals are not seen as living *in*, and acting out their lives in relations *to*, a wider reality, so much as creating and sustaining images of a wider reality, in part to rationalize what they are doing. They realize their reality, by 'reading into' their situation patterns of significant meaning" (Morgan et al., 1983, p.24).

In the remainder of this chapter, we pay close attention to several themes in this description:

1. Reality is an ongoing accomplishment: Sensemaking is about flows, a continually changing past, and variations in choice, irrevocability, and visibility that change the intensity of behavioral commitments.

2. People attempt to create order: Through social comparison, expectations, and action, flows become stabilized momentarily.
3. Sensemaking is a retrospective process: Remembering and looking back are a primary source of meaning.
4. People attempt to make situations rationally accountable: Justifications are compelling sources of meaning because they consist of socially acceptable reasons.
5. Symbolic processes are central in sensemaking: Presumptions about patterns that underlie concrete actions constrain interpretation.
6. People create and sustain images of wider reality: Maps are pragmatic images that provide temporary guides for action.
7. Images rationalize what people are doing: Images of reality derive from rationalizations of action, and this mechanism is a central theme in this chapter.

### SENSEMAKING AS COMMITTED INTERPRETATION

The description of sensemaking constructed by Morgan, Frost, and Pondy imposed a preliminary order on elements of the sensemaking process. In this section, we impose additional order with the proposal that sensemaking is a process of committed interpretation.

This proposal enlarges on a mechanism first identified by Salancik and Pfeffer (1978), which they described this way: "Commitment binds an individual to his or her behavior. The behavior becomes an undeniable and unchangeable aspect of the person's world, and when he makes sense of the environment, behavior is the point on which constructions or interpretations are based. This process can be described as a rationalizing process, in which behavior is rationalized by referring to features of the environment which support it. Such sense-making also occurs in a social context in which norms and expectations affect the rationalizations developed for behavior, and this can be described as a process of legitimating behavior. People develop acceptable justifications for their behavior as a way of making such behavior meaningful and explainable" (p. 231).

Although this mechanism was discussed (and buried) within a larger discussion of a social information processing approach to job attitudes, I want to highlight and develop it because it provides a compact explanation of sensemaking in organizations. The elaboration developed in this chapter is labeled "committed interpretation," both to highlight the social, symbolic nature of sensemaking and to designate binding action as the object of sensemaking. The concept of committed interpretation combines two mindsets, one involving interpretation and the other involving commitment.

#### The interpretation mindset

The interpretation mindset is represented by the W. I. Thomas theorem: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572). As Shalin (1986, p. 12) suggests, this theorem closely resembles William James's pragmatist dictum that, "We need only in cold blood

ACT as if the thing in question were real, and keep acting as if it were real, and it will infallibly end by growing in such a connection with our life that it will become real" (1890, Vol. II, p. 321). In both cases an equivocal situation becomes more stable when definitions are imposed and one among many patterns in the flow of reality is isolated.

What is important to recall is that Thomas, unlike James, did *not* intend the theorem to portray reality construction as a process that varied from individual to individual. Instead, he emphasized that definitions should vary from one group to another, that different tribes should define the same situation in different ways, and that things should not have the same meaning for different people in different periods of time and in different parts of the country. The symbolic environment from which definitions arise is always a shared environment and the outlook itself is always a shared outlook that cannot be ignored. The sensemaker's "actions always refer to the world that is already there, the intersubjective universe existing on the intersection of objectively established group perspectives" (Shalin, 1986, p. 13).

The suggestion that the collective condition of human existence is the source of meaning is made explicit in Porac, Thomas, and Baden-Fuller's (1989, p. 398) summary of the four key assumptions in the interpretative approach. These four assumptions comprise the interpretation mindset. Paraphrased, the key ideas include the following:

1. *Activities and structures are determined partly by micro momentary actions of members.* We emphasize the justification of committed actions as our key micro momentary action.
2. *Action is based on interpretations of cues; these interpretations are externalized by concrete activities.* We emphasize that committed action sets the stage for interpretation by narrowing attention to those cues that suggest potential justification, and that justified action then serves to validate and support whatever justification has been chosen to interpret the committed action.
3. *Meaning is constructed when people link received cues with existing cognitive structures.* We emphasize retrospect and the documentary method as the means by which this interpretive process unfolds.
4. *People are reflective and can verbalize the content, and sometimes the process, of their interpretations.* We take seriously people's accounts of how they accomplish interpretation, mindful, however, that retrospective sensemaking involves biased reconstruction of antecedents since outcomes are known at the time reconstruction occurs. This very bias is the strength of retrospect as a method of sensemaking since it edits out false starts and imposes a spurious order on an indeterminate past. But this same editing requires that investigators observe sensemaking as it unfolds if they wish to counteract this bias, which often means that ethnography and use of personal experience are crucial sources of data about interpretation.

The problems in working with an interpretive perspective are not only those of a temptation toward subjectivism and mistaking hindsight bias for efficient information processing, but also, as Keesing (1987) has argued, underestimating the constraints imposed by context, distributed information, differentials in power, and vested interests. Each of these potential blindspots seems to have

more effect on the content of justification than on the fact that behavior is the object of interpretation. Context affects the content of acceptable justifications and the choice of features of the environment that support the rationalizing. Context also has an effect on which behaviors are singled out for explanation. However, once the behavior is fixed, the process of sensemaking itself should unfold in essentially the sequence we propose in the next section.

### The commitment mindset

Having specified what constitutes an interpretation mindset, we now turn briefly to an explanation of the commitment mindset. The bulk of this chapter elaborates the idea that commitment is a reference point for sensemaking. This idea was implicit in my concept attainment study (Weick, 1964) and in both editions of my organizing book (Weick, 1969, 1979) and was made more explicit by Salancik and Pfeffer (1978).

The basic ideas of commitment are these. Normally, when people act, their reasons for doing things are either self-evident or uninteresting, especially when the actions themselves can be undone, minimized, or disowned. Actions that are neither visible nor permanent are easily explained. As actions become more public and irrevocable, however, they become harder to undo; when actions are also volitional, they become harder to disown. When action is irrevocable, public, and volitional, the search for explanations becomes less casual because more is at stake. Explanations that are developed retrospectively to justify committed actions are often stronger than beliefs developed under other less involving conditions because the search to find these explanations requires more effort and more of the self is on the line. These justifications become tenacious and produce selective attention, confident action, and self-confirmation. Once formed, tenacious justifications then prefigure subsequent perception and action, which means they are often self-confirming.

Commitment focuses the sensemaking process on three things: an elapsed action, socially acceptable justification for that action, and the potential for subsequent activities to validate or threaten the justification. Thus, commitment drives interaction patterns by tying behaviors, explanations, social support, and expectations together in a causal sequence. This sequence can become a causal loop that either stabilizes or amplifies subsequent action patterns. It is these patterns that people come to label as organizational designs. Commitments lead to patterns and, ultimately, to what we see as designs.

To illustrate how the idea of commitment reshapes organizational theory, consider two examples. First, the influential garbage can model of organizations (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972) suggests that organizations consist of streams of people, choices, solutions, and problems that intermittently converge, more for reasons of timing than logic. The concept of commitment suggests the possibility of a third basis for order in addition to those of timing and logic. Choice may not be one of four equal determinants of organizational outcomes, as is suggested by the garbage can theory; instead, choice may be the occasion when the other

three become organized. Problems, solutions, and people all are potential explanations that justify a binding choice (e.g., "I chose to fire him because he could not meet quality standards"; "We chose this line of technology because it will show the board we are serious about the future"; "We chose to move these people to Texas to bring more imagination to their operations.").

The second example hearkens back to the earlier discussion of equivocality. Staw (1980, p. 71) argues that organizations are often unclear about their goals and theories of causality, and that justification often removes some of this lack of clarity: "Under high levels of ambiguity, justification is necessary to both provide purpose for an organization's membership and rationale for parties external to the organization. In fact, organizations which face a great deal of ambiguity are frequently perceived as more effective when they have developed an elaborate or persuasive set of justifications for their particular goals and technology. . . . Thus, in many organizational settings justification can become reality: through justification, perceived sources of ambiguity can be explained away or replaced by shared meaning."

We show next how interpretation and commitment combine to produce sensemaking.

### The process of committed interpretation

The model of committed interpretation is straightforward. We preview it here and explore its components in more detail in the remainder of the chapter.

Most action is social, even when the other party is only imagined or implied. This assumption has two immediate and important consequences. First, when people become bound to acts, those acts tend to be interacts rather than solitary acts (Sandelands & Weick, 1991). Second, interacts themselves generate their own conditions of commitment since each party's action is public, irrevocable, and volitional relative to the other party in the exchange. When an interact occurs in a committing context and also generates its own commitment, the action becomes bound to both parties and a search for justification intensifies.

Since the committed action is actually a committed interact, the appropriate justifications tend to invoke social entities (e.g., "We did it because our role demanded it, . . . because we are colleagues, . . . because we are in competition, . . . because we respect each other."). Social justification is the crucial step in the model for organizational theory. Commitments to interacts often are justified by explanations that reify social structure. Behavioral commitments tend to be justified by constraints and opportunities, and one of the most convenient and socially acceptable ways to package constraints and opportunities is (as in terms of) macro entities (e.g., "They hoped we would do it, hinted that it should be done, created the chance to do it.").

Once macro entities are invoked to justify a commitment, people continue to use them as explanations. And they urge others to use these same explanations. To support these explanations, people deploy them in a manner that resembles self-fulfilling prophecies. They expect the social world to be put together the way their justifications say it is put together, they act as if it is put

together this way, and they selectively perceive what they see as if it were put together the way their justifications say. Through a mixture of reification, enactment, imitation, and proselytizing, incipient social structure is acted into the world and imposes order on that world. This process both creates new organization and reaffirms organization already in place.

Thus, straightforward, small-scale, micro behavioral commitments can have macro consequences, once we recognize five important properties of these commitments. First, they begin as commitments to social relationships rather than commitments to individual behaviors. Second, these social relationships often generate their own conditions of commitment. Third, since social relationships rather than behaviors are what people become bound to, justifications tend to invoke social entities rather than individual reasons. Fourth, reifications that justify social commitment tend to set up expectations that operate like self-fulfilling prophecies. And fifth, efforts to validate these social justifications tend to spread them to other actors.

Committed interpretation, therefore, is a sensemaking process that introduces stability into an equivocal flow of events by means of justifications that increase social order. Confused people pay closer attention to those interdependent acts that occur in conjunction with some combination of choice and/or publicity and/or irrevocability. (Commitment is an additive process that develops gradually [Salancik, 1977, p. 4].) As they become more fully bound to these interdependent actions, people are more likely to invoke some larger social entity to justify the commitment. This act of justification, which often resembles reification, invokes a presupposed order such as a role system, institution, organization, group, or imputed interest group that explains the action.

The residue from an episode of committed interpretation is a slight increase in social order plus a partial articulation of what that order consists of (e.g., role system, professional norms, group pressure, collective preference). When people act on behalf of these committed interpretations and their reified content, their actions become more orderly, more predictable, and more organized. As a result of this tightening, their actions have more impact on others and are more likely to be imitated. Thus, both the form and substance of organization become more distinct and the world momentarily becomes slightly less chaotic. And all because some action first stuck out as more public, more irrevocable, and more attached to a set of actors than were other actions.

In the remainder of this chapter, we expand on three themes mentioned in this overview of committed interpretation: interacts as the object of commitment, reification as the content of justification, and validation as the outcome of justification.

### THE COMMITMENT TO INTERACTS

Commitment is a reference point for sensemaking, and the object of that commitment is a double interact, not an act. When an action by Person A evokes a specific action in Person B, an interact exists (e.g., author makes an assertion

and editor criticizes assertion). If we then add in A's response to B's reaction, a double interact exists (e.g., author modifies assertion in response to criticism). Hollander and Willis (1967) argue that the double interact is the basic unit of analysis for social influence, because it can distinguish among conformity ( $A_xB_yA_y$ ), anticonformity ( $A_xB_xA_y$ ), independence ( $A_xB_yA_x$ ), and uniformity ( $A_xB_xA_x$ ).

The double interact is itself a committing context, because it contains all four variables that bind a person to action. *Volition* is present at two points, both when A takes an initial action and when A decides what to do in response to B's reaction. A's initial action is also *public*, because it is observed by B, and *explicit*, because B is able to see that a reaction is warranted. A's second action is *irrevocable* in that he or she had an opportunity to change the first act and has now responded to new information with the second action.

If we simply take the  $A_1B_1A_2$  sequence one step further and add  $B_2$  (a triple interact), we now have a sequence in which there should be more commitment to actions  $A_2$  and  $B_2$ , because actions  $A_1$  and  $B_1$  created the conditions for commitment.

The potential for an interact to become a committing context when it extends to a double and triple interact may explain why it is so important to retain a *social psychology* of organizations. The smallest unit within which all four conditions of commitment can occur at the same time is the double interact. Conceivably, any action performed within this setting can dominate the actor's attention and draw justifications. If this is plausible, then whatever happens within double and triple interacts should have a disproportionately large effect on meaning and interpretation.

### From interacts to collective structures

While the basic forms of interaction—the interact, double interact, and triple interact—have relevance to commitment because they embody conditions that can bind people to actions, we have said little about the content of the actions to which people become bound. This content is the sense that people feel and share.

Content becomes more salient if we reexamine the concept of collective structure (Weick, 1979, chap. 4). Allport (1962) argues that collective structure forms whenever "there is a pluralistic situation in which in order for an individual (or class of individuals) to perform some act (or have some experience) that he 'desires' to perform (or for which he is 'set') it is necessary that *another* person (or persons) perform certain acts (either similar or different and complementary to his own)" (p. 17).

Collective structures form when self-sufficiency proves problematic. This idea is the same starting point for organizational analysis that Barnard (1938) adopted in his famous analogy of men coordinating their actions to move a stone (pp. 86–89). If we translate Allport's description into the ABAB sequence of the triple interact, then all we need to do is argue that  $A_1$  and  $B_1$  are instrumental acts,  $A_2$  and  $B_2$  are consummatory acts, and that B must do  $B_1$  if A is to enjoy  $A_2$ ,

and A must do  $A_1$  if B is to enjoy  $B_2$ . Neither A nor B has direct control over their outcomes, and they must entice someone else to contribute a means activity to get their own desired outcomes. For example, editors need good manuscripts if they are to print issues of a journal on time, and authors need to have their work printed if they want to achieve wider dissemination of their ideas. The instrumental actions of writing manuscripts and providing journal space allow both parties to experience outcomes that they cannot control directly. Writing allows editors to print, and printing allows writers to influence.

When authors write and editors publish, these acts are part of longer strings of action. As writing proceeds, the author becomes bound, not just to the writing itself, but also to the subsequent steps of evaluation and dissemination. As editing proceeds, the editor becomes bound, not just to providing space for print, but to filling that space with interesting text and doing so in a timely manner. Thus, each party gets bound to a larger number of actions and contributions by other people.

These additional actions and people tend to be included in whatever justification is adopted. And this wider inclusion increases the possibility that justifications will invoke roles or other social forms as the explanation for the commitment. Commitment to interdependent behaviors, justified as roles in an emerging collective structure, sets the stage for these justifications to become entities.

In other words, people commit to and coordinate instrumental acts (means) before they worry about shared goals (Weick, 1979, pp. 91–95). But shared goals do emerge as people search for reasons that justify the earlier interdependent means to which they have become bound. And those reasons tend to be variations on the theme, "We did those things *because they were roles in a system*" (Katz & Kahn, 1978, chap. 7). Both the roles and the system that requires them (Wiley, 1988) are created and given substance when people justify a collective structure that was originally built around interdependent means.

### From behavioral commitment to social commitment

Committed interpretation, thus, is distinctly social in at least three ways. First, the act that is the object of commitment tends to be a double interact rather than an act. For example, strategic conversations, defined as "verbal interactions within superior-subordinate dyads focusing on strategic generalities" (Westley, 1990, pp. 337–338), are double interacts in which top managers and middle managers co-determine strategic outcomes. Their joint efforts to synthesize feelings and frames into implemented strategy are volitional, public, irrevocable interacts that bind both parties and necessitate an explanation that justifies the relationship.

The second sense in which committed interpretation is social is that the justifications chosen to explain the committed interact are socially acceptable within the setting where the commitment occurred. For example, the interaction

order among radiologists and technicians that Barley (1986) documented differed among hospitals and across time, and different rationales for dominance or cooperation were invoked in each setting.

The third sense in which committed interpretation is social is that social structure is often invoked to justify commitments. For example, social movement organizations often coalesce when “aggregates of individuals who share common grievances and attributional orientations” (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986, p. 464) justify their actions by invoking silent constituents for whom they serve as agents of change. The justification lends form to these “unmobilized sentiment pools” and suggests the existence of an organizational base for expressing their discontent and pursuing their interests. The social movement becomes a social form constituted as justification for commitments to double interacts involving grievance.

In their description of sensemaking, Morgan et al. (1983) argued that images of reality tend to derive from rationalization. What we have suggested is that it is interacts rather than acts that are rationalized. This, in turn, suggests that the resulting images of reality will be social images. Previous work on individual commitment tends to overlook the degree to which commitment is grounded in social relationships and is justified by social entities. Once this possibility is entertained, then commitment becomes a more powerful tool to track sensemaking and the emergence of social structure in organizations.

## IE JUSTIFICATION OF COMMITTED INTERACTS

When people justify interacts, those justifications routinely acknowledge the existence of interdependence (e.g., Zanna & Sande, 1987). The justifications lend substance to the interdependence and reify it into a social entity. For example, I can justify becoming bound to an interdependent sequence by arguing that it was expected; it was my role; it demonstrated that I trust you and am myself trustworthy; it accomplished something neither of us could have done alone; I am subordinate to you; it is our duty; we were told to do it; or we had the same interest. Each of these justifications affirms that a social act was the object of commitment, and each justification lends substance to that social entity.

The point is that reification of a collectivity justifies commitment. Having become bound to interdependent action, if the person says, “That’s the way we do things in this culture, in this firm, in this family, or when women are involved,” then cultures, firms, families, and gender are invoked as macro sources of micro constraints.

This line of argument resembles Knorr-Cetina’s (1981) explanation of a possible linkage between micro and macro phenomena. The macro is not a distinct existential level that emerges from micro events. Instead, the macro is constructed and pursued *within* micro interaction. Micro interaction is constrained by representations of macro entities alleged to exist as a distinct layer of social reality (e.g., see avoided test in Weick, 1979, pp. 149–152). But aside from their ef-

fects as mediated through representations that are treated as if they were real, macro “entities” have no separate existential effects.

Participants “continually employ notions and engage in actions whose mutual intelligibility appears to be based upon their presupposition and knowledge of broader societal units” (Knorr-Cetina, 1981, p. 12). Thus a binding interdependent action is made intelligible and justified by presupposition of societal institutions and collective sentiments. Macro constructions such as organization, family, state, media, or market are created in micro situations, often in the form of justifications for interdependent actions (“We did it to preserve freedom, gain competitive advantage, create jobs, influence the market”), and then treated as if they were real constraints to be honored, resisted, bypassed, rationalized, reversed, or ignored.

As we will see later, reification is an *initial* move in an extended chain of validating actions, many of which lend substance to what originally was a mere presumption of social structure. As both Thomas and James made clear, presumptions taken seriously often become self-validating (see Weick, Gilfillan, & Keith, 1973, for a demonstration of this effect). When people presuppose societal institutions, expectations, constraints, and explanations that transcend the committed interact are activated and inform an institution’s development.

## Symbols and justification

To understand the role of reification in justification, we need to take a closer look at Morgan et al.’s (1983) suggestion that sensemaking involves “symbolic processes through which reality is created and sustained” (p. 4). To understand this phrase, we need to look both at symbols and at the way in which they become linked with concrete actions.

The content of sensemaking comes from preexisting symbols, norms, and social structures (Isaac, 1990, p. 6) that people reproduce and transform rather than create from scratch (Bhaskar, 1978, p. 13). Sensemaking itself is often described as sculpting done by a clever bricoleur (Harper, 1987, p. 74; Levi-Strauss, 1966) who uses whatever materials and tools are at hand to fashion whatever sense is needed. So, although we persist, as do Morgan et al. (1983) in using the verb *create* to describe sensemaking, we do so mindful that the activity itself is shaped by presuppositions and precedents (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985, pp. 732–733) as well as discoveries.

When Morgan et al. (1983, pp. 4–5) talk about symbols in the context of organizations, they emphasize the quality of bricolage: “The word *symbol* derives from Greek roots which combine the idea of sign, in the sense of a mark, token, insignia, means of identification, with that of a throwing and putting together. A symbol is a sign which denotes something much greater than itself, and which calls for the association of certain conscious and unconscious ideas, in order for it to be endowed with its full meaning and significance. A sign achieves the status of a symbol when it is interpreted, not in terms of strict resemblance with what is signified, but when other patterns of suggestion and meaning are

'thrown upon' or 'put together' with the sign to interpret it as part of some much wider symbolic whole. . . Any object, action, event, utterance, concept, or image offers itself as raw material for symbol creation, at any place, and at any time."

Although organizational symbols can take many forms, the simple classification proposed by Czarniawska-Joerges and Joerges (1990) is a reasonable starting point. They suggest that people use at least three verbal tools to invest experience with meaning: labels, metaphors, and platitudes. "Labels tell *what* things are, they classify [e.g., decentralization, leadership excellence]; metaphors say *how* things are, they relate, give life [e.g., personal development as gardening, organization as garbage can]; platitudes conventionalize, they standardize and establish *what is normal* [e.g., democracy must be built anew in each generation]" (p. 339). Labels, metaphors, and platitudes link the present with the past, impose past definitions on present puzzles, and provide compelling images if those images are shared.

The probability of sharing is increased if socialization processes in organizations focus on language (Jablin, 1987; Louis, 1980). "Perhaps the most important context in which definitions of organizational reality are created and shaped is the socialization of new members" (Eisenberg & Riley, 1988, p. 136). Newcomers are exposed to a whole new vocabulary and grammar of symbols, jargon, ideology, attitudes, stories, private jokes, and restricted words, which shape their inclination to label events and which produce a trained incapacity to see the world differently.

#### Documentary method and justification

Once this vocabulary of symbols is in place, it becomes the language of justification. These symbols become linked with committed interacts through a process called the "documentary method" (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 78). Morgan et al. (1983) anticipated this process when they observed, "Symbols, when approached upon the basis of this perspective [sensemaking], assume principal significance as constructs through which individuals concretize and give meaningful form to their everyday lives" (pp. 24–25). The documentary method, which Heritage (1984, p. 84) has called the "constituent task of making sense," speaks to the linkage of concrete events with meaningful forms. The symbol simultaneously refers to the here and now and to the larger social scene, and the documentary method is the means by which these two worlds are connected.

Garfinkel (1967) defined the documentary method in the following manner: "The method consists of treating an actual appearance as 'the document of,' as 'pointing to,' as 'standing on behalf of' a presupposed underlying pattern. Not only is the pattern derived from its individual documentary evidences but the individual evidences, in their turn, are interpreted on the basis of 'what is known' about the underlying pattern. Each is used to elaborate the other" (p. 78).

Several parallels between the process of justification and the documentary method are suggested. The committed interact is the equivalent of the actual ap-

pearance or the document. The justification is the equivalent of an underlying pattern that presupposes a macro context. Neither the interact nor the underlying pattern are labeled initially. Instead, each fleshes out the other. The interact suggests a derived pattern, and the interact then takes its meaning from this derivation, which itself has become strengthened because there appears to be another tangible outcropping that exemplifies it; each is used to elaborate the other. The connection of a cryptic current interact with a presupposed pattern is the key interpretive procedure that reduces equivocality.

Leiter's (1980, pp. 165–189) extended discussion of the documentary method suggests the following nuances of this interpretive procedure. The method itself is deceptive in its apparent simplicity, since it appears to assert simply that people treat a set of appearances as standing on behalf of an underlying pattern. In the context of committed interpretation, we assert that the appearance that gets attention is a committed interact, that the pattern invoked to justify it is a feature of social structure consistent with the interact, that each elaborates the other through enactment into the world, and that through enactment into the world the pattern gains validity and the interact gains meaning. Precisely *which* pattern is likely to be invoked cannot be specified in advance simply because the content is sensitive to context and depends on which explanations are salient at the moment an accounting is required.

A subtle but crucial feature of the documentary method is that it lends factual character to a transient social world. The presupposed pattern creates a sense of stable social structure that is consistent across time and confers meaning on concrete acts that seem to occur under its aegis. The interacts literally become meaningful because they occur in a stable context, even though this stability is itself a construction. Precisely because the here and now can be "connected to the transcendent social scene" (Leiter, 1980, p. 168), the person is protected from having to deal with a continuing string of idiosyncratic, random appearances. "The members' sense of social structure involves, and depends upon, the stability of the object over and in spite of variations in situational appearances" (p. 169).

To use the documentary method is to presume and rely on the facticity of the social world while simultaneously creating that facticity. The world must be assumed to be real for it to be made real. Thus, the ability to assume a factual social world is necessary for facticity to be created. It is the joint effect of being bound to an interact and of being exposed to symbols that portray a presumably factual social world, which, in the case of organizational members, make it relatively easy to use this process of interpretation.

An important implication is that the documentary method is crucial for micro organizational analysis beyond its appropriateness for the concept of committed interpretation. The documentary method suggests a means by which organizational structure itself is created. Earlier, we suggested that justifications often reify social entities. Committed actions can be justified as macro necessities (e.g., "This is a partnership."). Once invoked as justifications, these macro entities then materialize when they are treated as if they are real constraints.

Although the earlier discussion of reification was confined to interacts, the

relevance of reification for organizational sensemaking extends beyond these small units. A suggestion of this broader relevance is to be found in Hilbert's (1990) description of how skills used in the documentary method create the macro structures that make sense of micro events: "Microevents are classified into existence even as they are used to document the reality of macroevents of which they are examples. Macrostructures, then, are idealizations or typifications that are documented, filled out, and continually reproduced and modified by their microexamples, these examples being exactly what they are by affiliation with the very macropatterns they are used to document" (p. 803).

To return to the starting point for this chapter, sensemaking is an attempt to produce micro stability amidst continuing change. People produce micro stabilities by social commitment, which means that interacts become meaningful and that both the interacts and the meanings will be repeated. Stated more abstractly, micro stability is produced when people "orient to a presupposed social-structural order, reifying and reproducing it in the course of their activity and imposing its reality on each other as they do" (Hilbert, 1990, p. 796). Thus, reification starts with the documentary method. People presume that something concrete, often their own committed behavior, is a document of some larger pattern that, having been presumed, proceeds to flesh out both the particular and the general.

Illustrations of sensemaking using the documentary method are relatively common in the organizational literature. For example, Westley's (1990) discussion of middle managers and strategy presumes a mechanism similar to that of the documentary method: "Strategy is a meaning generating activity concerned with integrating and interpreting information. As such it is abstracted from specific tactics, policies, or operational procedures while being intimately concerned with relating these into an overall pattern" (p. 342). Strategy is the underlying pattern; tactics, policies, and procedures are the documents; and each relates to and integrates the other in the interest of meaning.

Westley describes a female middle manager who is excluded from the inner circle of people who know the strategic pattern thoroughly, and who, as a result of this exclusion, finds sensemaking difficult. When given a 2-inch pile of memos to digest and comment on, this person finds herself "searching for strategic generalities and the total picture so that she can make sense of the specific particular decisions that are passed along to her" (p. 343). She literally has documents in search of patterns. Having been excluded from strategic activity, she has not even a clue about the larger context of these memos.

Other examples of the documentary method can be cited. Daft and Weick (1984, p. 286) describe organizations as interpretation systems that tie external events (i.e., "documents") to internal categories (i.e., "underlying patterns"). Ranson, Hinings, and Greenwood (1980) state explicitly that "the 'rational' panoply of roles, rules, and procedures which make up organizational design is not pre-given in the organization but is the skilled, practical, and retrospective accomplishment of members. . . . Prescribed roles, rules, and authority relations are drawn upon retrospectively to locate and validate the emergent action within

the wider context of meaning" (pp. 2, 5). Roles and rules are the underlying patterns that render the documents of "emergent action" more meaningful. Porac et al. (1989) suggest that specific transactions involving what to produce, what to purchase, and whom to target as customers are all documents that gain their meaning from a mental model of the environment that consists of identity beliefs and causal beliefs (p. 399). This mental model contains the underlying patterns that inform and explain the technical and material transactions.

The central role of justification in sensemaking has often been overlooked because traditionally the process has been labeled "*self-justification*" (e.g. Aronson, 1980, pp. 7-10). This phrase carries a connotation of defensiveness and distortion (e.g., Staw, 1980, p. 59), which deflects attention from the more neutral meaning that "a rational reason for doing something is merely rationalizing done within socially acceptable bounds" (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978, p. 235, footnote 3). Furthermore, even the qualifier, "*self*" is misleading, since the self is socially defined and takes many forms (e.g., Simmel, 1971, pp. 10-11). If there are multiple selves, then the phrase *self-justification* specifies little.

The preceding analysis suggests that one way to understand the statement "symbolic processes create and sustain reality" is to argue that organizations begin to materialize when social rationales for social commitments are created. Not all justifications consist of reification, although all committed behaviors are social. This social character of commitment is always available as a cue that can guide the search for an underlying pattern toward social forms and macro entities. Since organizational settings are multiactor social forms, it seems safe to presume both that reification is a common route that justification will take initially, and that action initially explained by reification soon generates the reality that replaces the reification with substance.

#### THE VALIDATION OF JUSTIFICATION

Many justifications are not fully formed immediately after commitment occurs. Instead, they are worked out over time as the implications of the action are gradually discovered and new meanings of the action are created. Thus, the tendency for people writing about commitment to dwell on the immediate justification seems too limited because it focuses on too short a time interval. Key effects of commitment can also be observed later in the period, which we label postjustification action. There is evidence that once a justification begins to form, it exerts an effect on subsequent action (e.g., Penner, Fitch, & Weick, 1966; Weick & Prestholdt, 1968).

Justification is not a brief moment in sensemaking. Instead, it shapes and is shaped by action subsequent to the commitment. Thus, if a person justifies a decision to accept an unpleasant assignment with the explanation that it will be a challenge and an opportunity, that person often can create just such attractions and solidify the justification by the way he or she performs the assignment. The person acts so as to turn the assignment into an opportunity; these

actions validate the rationale by actually creating opportunities, which further intensifies action; and the result is a justification whose validity is demonstrable and under the control of the actor. This scenario shows most clearly how justifications gain their tenacity and validity.

The way in which postjustification action contributes to validity can be illustrated if we extend a straightforward example of postaction justification. Salancik (1977, p. 27) describes a man who goes to a sales convention in Hawaii and justifies that action in different ways to different audiences. To himself he says he needed a vacation, to his wife he says it was a business obligation, and to his boss he says he wanted to survey the competition. The point we want to add is that, having made these justifications, he now will act more like vacations are important, conventions are a necessity, and surveying the competition is crucial. Justifications can turn into preferences that control subsequent attention and action (Weick, 1966, 1967). Detecting this outcome requires that we pay closer attention to the ways in which repeated use of a justification reaffirms its value and begins to transform it into a stable frame reference. Sensitivity to these outcomes requires, in turn, that we look for the ways in which actions following commitment are used to create and solidify an emergent justification.

#### Postdecision validation

Our focus on the postdecision period shows the continuing impact on organizational behavior of Leon Festinger and others who worked with cognitive dissonance theory. While dissonance theory *per se* has been increasingly bounded (e.g., Cooper & Fazio, 1989; Scher & Cooper, 1989), theorists of sensemaking continue to elaborate the basic insight that postdecision behavior differs markedly from predecision behavior (Jones & Gerard, 1967). During the predecision period, people pay equal attention to alternatives in an effort to reduce their ignorance. If there is differential attention to alternatives, they pay more attention to the alternatives they eventually reject. This is the pattern of information processing that Daft and Lengel (1986) associate with uncertainty.

Once the decision is made, the problem shifts from ignorance to confusion. This counterintuitive outcome—How can people be confused *after* a decision?—occurs because people temporarily face multiple, conflicting definitions of what their decision means. Not only does it mean that they will receive the positive features of their chosen alternative and avoid the negative features of their unchosen alternatives; it also means they will receive the negative features of their chosen alternative and forgo the positive features of their rejected alternative. Thus, when the decision means many different conflicting things, the problem is one of too many meanings, not too few, and the problem shifts from one of uncertainty to one of equivocality (Daft & MacIntosh, 1981). The decision has become an equivoque (Weick, 1979, p. 174), an event with two or more possible meanings. This may explain in part the much-discussed “regret” that often follows decision making.

We see that equivocality enters the sensemaking process at two points: be-

fore a committing action occurs, and immediately after a committed action becomes someone’s responsibility but has not yet been justified.

#### Validation and action intensity

After the committed action has been chosen, there is little advantage to reflecting on the advantages of the rejected alternative or disadvantages of the chosen alternative. Once a decision is made, action is more effective when probabilistic information is treated as if it were deterministic and beliefs that are only relatively true are treated as if they were absolutely true (Brickman, 1987, p. 36). “Commitment marshals forces that destroy the plausibility of alternatives and remove their ability to inhibit action. These forces are nonrational, though their use is functional. . . . We may choose our actions in the first place on the rational basis of their standing in our informational system, but we drive them, energize them, and justify them on the nonrational basis of our motivational commitment to them” (Brickman, 1987, pp. 40–41).

Intensity facilitates the justification of commitments because it helps people accept activities that are not the best they might obtain and allows them to turn forgone possibilities into enhancement of the chosen alternative. People who pursue a chosen alternative unequivocally and with intensity often uncover unexpected attractions (Brickman, 1987, p. 54), with the result that the committed person is no longer greatly troubled by the thought that there might be more attractive alternatives.

Intense actions justify commitment by synthesizing positive and negative consequences of the chosen alternative. But intense actions also enable people to enact realities in which the justifications become accurate stories about how the world actually works. Consider an example proposed by Henshel (1987, p. 34).

Suppose a judge makes a public, irrevocable choice to dispose of juvenile delinquency cases on the basis of whether the defendant comes from an intact or broken home. The judge justifies this choice on the basis that broken homes produce delinquents who are incorrigible. The justification is a theory and a reification as well as a prediction that can be confirmed or disconfirmed. When the judge sends those from broken homes to prison more often than those from intact homes, this action exposes those in broken homes to prison experience, they find it harder to get jobs once they are released, and they resort more quickly to more serious crimes. As a result, official crime statistics now contain more cases that confirm the theory. Broken homes now do in fact correlate with a higher recidivism rate, which leads people to invoke the justification with more confidence. Judges resort to even more differential sentencing based on data about conditions at home because the “facts” show that home conditions make a difference.

A justification with little intrinsic validity comes to be seen as more valid because powerful people believe in it and act on these beliefs (Snyder, 1984). For these people, the world has become sensible. What they underestimate is their role in producing this sense. What has happened is that a justification has cre-

ated a serial self-fulfilling prophecy that builds confidence in the prophecy through a deviation-amplifying causal loop (Maruyama, 1963). Under these conditions, both the justification and the action mutually strengthen one another, and the result is intense action that enacts a portion of the environment people confront. Thus, intensity guided by commitment can change the environment to resemble more closely the justification that was first imposed on it.

Similar scenarios are found throughout the organizational literature. Starbuck (1976, p. 1081), for example, argues that organizations play an active role in shaping their environments, partly because they seek environments that are sparsely inhabited by competitors, partly because they define their products and outputs in ways that emphasize distinctions between themselves and their competitors, partly because they rely on their own experience to infer environmental possibilities, and partly because they need to impose simplicity on complex relationships. A key mechanism in all of these scenarios is that perceptions and actions validate one another in ways that resemble self-fulfilling prophecies: "It is primarily in domains where an organization believes it exerts influence, that the organization attributes change to its own influence, and in domains where an organization believes itself impotent, it tends to ignore influence opportunities and never to discover whether its influence is real. . . . Moreover, it is the beliefs and perceptions founded on social reality which are especially liable to self-confirmation" (Starbuck, 1976, p. 1081).

Writing about political institutions, March and Olsen (1989) observed that "much of the richness of ecological theories of politics stems from the way in which the actions of each participant are part of the environments of others. The environment of each political actor is, therefore, partly self-determined as each reacts to the other. . . . When environments are created, the actions taken in adapting to an environment are partly responses to previous actions by the same actor, reflected through the environment. A common result is that small signals are amplified into large ones, and the general implication is that routine adaptive processes have consequences that cannot be understood without linking them to an environment that is simultaneously, and endogenously, changing" (p. 46).

Thus, political actors, as well as organizational actors in general, choose and create some of their own constraints, particularly when they justify committed interactions and then treat these justifications as prescriptive and factual and important.

## CONCLUSION

A dominant question for scholars of organizing is, How do people produce and acquire a sense of order that allows them to coordinate their actions in ways that have mutual relevance? The answer proposed here is, by concrete communicative interaction in which people invoke macro structures to justify commitments. Thus, social order is created continuously as people make commitments and develop valid, socially acceptable justifications for these commitments. Phrased in

this way, individual sensemaking has the potential to be transformed into social structures and to maintain these structures. Commitment is one means by which social structure is realized. This proposal suggests a possible mechanism by which structuration (e.g., Barley, 1986; Giddens, 1984) actually works.

The preceding analysis also implies the following:

1. Sensemaking is focused on those actions around which the strongest commitments form.
2. The content of sensemaking consists of justifications that are plausible to, advocated by, sanctioned within, and salient for important reference groups with which the actors identify.
3. Actions "mean" whatever justifications become attached to them. Committed actions are equivocal (Daft & MacIntosh, 1981) since they have multiple meanings; the justification process reduces this confusion (Daft & Lengel, 1986).
4. Organizing begins with moments of commitment. These moments determine the meanings that are available to make sense of events that fill the other noncommitting periods. The generation of meaning is a discontinuous process that is activated when important actions coincide with settings in which those actions are performed volitionally, publicly, explicitly, and irrevocably. Among our many actions, few occur under conditions that are binding. Most organizations, most of the time, activate few of these committing conditions. When they do, they activate them only for a handful of people. Since commitment is an additive process, commitments strengthen slowly and incrementally. Furthermore, new justifications and new meanings are slow to emerge as they are grounded in old meanings that persist even though they are outdated. As a result, organizational life may be experienced by many as empty and meaningless. This sense of anomie should decline the more action is encouraged and the more committing the context within which that action unfolds.
5. Presuppositions, expectations, and even faith are important engines in the sensemaking process, especially when actors are confident and environments are malleable. In understructured settings such as temporary systems, small firms, and entrepreneurial ventures, motivated presuppositions can exert influence and alter interaction patterns. Alteration is even more likely when the presuppositions and actions form a deviation-amplifying feedback loop. Micro dynamics have the potential to create sensibleness by actually stabilizing the environment, and this is the point of analyzing what happens *after* a justification is formulated. Justification is not just head work. Thoughts are acted into the world (Porac et al., 1989, pp. 398–401).
6. Organizations are ideal sites for committed interpretation because they generate action, champion accountability, make choices, value good reasons, and scrutinize everything. But organizations also exaggerate their intentional nature and thus often miss the fact that their interpretations are focused on their commitments. People *do* know best to which they are committed, but not because they knew it and then became committed. It is just the opposite. Action leads the sensemaking process; it does not follow it. People need to be less casual about action since whatever they do has the potential to bind them and focus their sensemaking. Inaction, repetitive action, and idiosyncratic action all have direct effects on what people know and how well they know it. Action is intelligence, and until it is deployed, meaning and sense will be underdeveloped.
7. Social psychology is crucial for organizational analysis because it is the one discipline that does not fall prey to the error of assuming that large effects imply large causes. Social psychology is about small events that enlarge because they are em-

bedded in amplifying causal loops, are acted into networks where they spread (Porac et al., 1989), become sources that are imitated, resolve important uncertainties at impressionable moments, make discontinuous changes in performance (Chambliss, 1989), and so on. Organizations are not monoliths. Instead, they are loosely coupled fragments (Orton & Weick, 1990) just as individuals are. This fragmentation means that the relevant unit of analysis is small in size though not in influence, that small events spread intermittently and fortuitously, and that macro perspectives are hollow unless linked with micro dynamics.

It is important to reiterate the way in which commitments serve to guide organizational behavior. Our challenge as researchers is not to predict exactly what will happen in each organizational moment. To attempt that is to attempt to predict the path of a bouncing football (Kuhn & Beam, 1982, pp. xxi–xxii): It is neither necessary nor possible. Instead, what we need to understand are those events that give direction and meaning to the stream of organizational moments.

That is what commitments do. Once a person makes a commitment, then subsequent events often are interpreted in ways that confirm the soundness of that commitment. Thus, commitments constrain the meanings that people impose on streams of experience.

The picture of an organization that emerges from these ideas is that of a stream of problems, solutions, and people tied together by choices. What happens over time is that choices mobilize reasons and justifications, which people then use to make elements in these streams more orderly. Organizing starts with a set of choices and streams. When the streams converge, people pay attention and construct explanations for the convergence. Their explanations vary depending on their needs, their associates, and their prior choices. The stream of consciousness in organizations takes the tangible form of streams of people, solutions, and problems that become organized to justify choices. When we say that people construct reality, what we mean is that they use commitments to guide their efforts at sensemaking. Commitments are what they start with. And commitments are what shape their continuing search for sensible work in a sensible setting.

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